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By David Rogers

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Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the U.S.
commander in Afghanistan,
goes before Congress this week, and with him comes this question: Who’s really
in charge here, the generals or President Barack Obama?

The long-awaited hearings, beginning Tuesday before the House and Senate Armed
Services committees, are a bookend of sorts to Obama’s address last Tuesday at
West Point committing 30,000 more troops to the war effort in Afghanistan.
Implicit in the president’s decision is an effective cap of about 100,000 for
the American force, but top Democrats fear that unless Obama is more assertive,
the military chain of command will undermine his July 2011 target to begin some
U.S.
withdrawal.

“The president’s decision is already being softened and made mush of,” Senate
Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl Levin (D-Mich.) told POLITICO. And
within the House and Senate Appropriations committees, senior Democrats —
themselves veterans of past wars — have grown increasingly concerned by the
political clout of a generation of younger, often press-savvy military
commanders.

McChrystal and his strong ally, Gen. David Petraeus, commander of the U.S.
Central Command, are quotable stars in today’s modern media; their wartime

budgets not only are large but also give them exceptional discretion that is the envy of their foreign policy partners in the State Department.

The September leak of McChrystal’s confidential report on the need for more troops helped box in Obama and quickly became grist for the Republican political mill. Even before that, Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.), chairman of the House defense appropriations panel, complained of what he saw as a pattern of news reports from the military in Afghanistan promoting a buildup. And while Obama has a retired general of his own in National Security Adviser Jim Jones, the 65-year-old Marine four-star has not been the counterweight that many of his admirers had predicted.

“I’ve always believed that the president of the United States is the commander in chief,” said Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii), who was awarded the Medal of Honor in World War II. “It concerns me when I see my president, the commander in chief, having to debate with generals. They can do that privately, but he should be able to say to General A, ‘This is the way we’re going to do our business.’ ... I would expect generals to advise the president but not to go public.”

The U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, retired Lt. Gen. Karl Eikenberry — whose own cables critical of a military buildup were leaked in November — appears alongside McChrystal this week. And having them side by side underscores the need for greater clarity and cooperation going forward.

“The pace [of withdrawal] is condition-based. The location is condition-based. But what wasn’t condition-based is the beginning,” Levin said of the July 2011 date. “I want to see if McChrystal says, yes, he understands that.”

“Second, does he support it? He’s not obligated to. I’m asking for his honest personal opinion. If he has a different opinion, he should tell us. He’s obligated to tell us. ... Their advice should be private, ... with the one caveat [that] if they are asked by a congressional committee for their best professional opinion, they are duty bound to give it to us.”

For all the tensions, independent observers say the driving force behind Obama’s decision was the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and Jones couldn’t be expected to stand down the military. “Our system is a dialectical one. Countering forces produce a ‘synthesis,’” said one Washington veteran of past war debates. But much will rest now on Defense Secretary Robert Gates to make the decision stick — and be a bridge between the uniformed military and White House.

Together with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Gates dominated House and Senate hearings last week on the president’s decision, and the two were prominent on Sunday morning new shows, as well.

July 2011 is “the beginning of a process,” Gates told NBC News’s “Meet the Press” and one that he estimated could run three to four years past that date. “We will begin to thin our forces and begin to bring them home. But the pace of that ... will depend on circumstances on the ground. And those judgments will be made by our commanders in the field.”

Just as important, in Senate testimony last week, Gates said what has been left unsaid by others: that the military establishment agrees no more troops will be requested beyond the current planned surge.

This came in a little-noticed exchange in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, where Gates first spelled out that he has been given the discretion to add 3,000 support personnel beyond the combat brigades, bringing the so-called surge component to potentially 33,000.

“You have no doubt that we will not be adding more troops to Afghanistan after this deployment, outside of the 3,000 potentially that you have may have to add?” asked Sen. Ted Kaufman (D-Del.).

“That is the commitment that we have made to the president,” Gates said.

That Kaufman pursued this question was not entirely surprising: His former boss, Vice President Joe Biden, was among those most leery of McChrystal’s initial troop request. But it also shows how much the administration, beginning with the president, wants to beat down any comparisons to the steady escalation of troops committed to Vietnam in the ’60s.

“So this is not like ... comparisons to Vietnam. This is not even like Iraq,” Kaufman said in reply to Gates. “This is a firm commitment by the president of the United States, agreed by the major foreign policy strategic planners in our government, that in July 2011 we’re going to start drawing down troops and we’re not going to be adding more troops.”

To be sure, implementing that decision — like Vietnam — is easier said than done, and one of the ironies of the debate thus far is that while the administration keeps saying this isn’t Vietnam, they keep talking about it.

In explaining the “unholy alliance” of Al Qaeda and Taliban forces, Gates suddenly felt compelled to double-back and say he wasn’t restating a new domino theory — made famous by Lyndon B. Johnson’s insistence that the U.S. would be fighting on “the beaches of Waikiki” if Vietnam fell to the communists. Clinton herself spoke of “Afghanization” — echoing then-President Richard Nixon’s “Vietnamization” policy in 1969. And in the long press accounts Sunday of their own decision making, White House aides — many of whom grew up after Vietnam —

made a point that they’d gone back and read Gordon Goldstein’s 2008 “Lessons in Disaster” on McGeorge Bundy, a key adviser to both John F. Kennedy and Johnson on the Indochina war.

In truth, there’s nothing about the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan thus far that matches the murderous killing in Vietnam — and nothing quite like North Vietnam itself, which was able to send large, even mechanized, forces into the South to support insurgent guerrillas.

But the presence of porous borders, the challenge of building and partnering with the Afghan security forces and the large costs to the American taxpayer are all real — and similar to Vietnam.

Most focus has been on the immediate cost of the added troops this year and a forthcoming supplemental spending bill that could approach $40 billion, when added funds for the State Department’s “civilian surge” are added. But this is only a first payment, and given Gates’s and Clinton’s answers, the increased commitment knocks a far larger hole in Obama’s budget.

Until now, the administration has estimated it could get through fiscal 2010, ending next Sept. 30, with $130 billion for overseas contingency funds for Iraq and Afghanistan. From 2011 through 2014, it predicted it would need only $50 billion annually since the pace of the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq is to accelerate over the coming year.

In fact, these numbers will clearly be inadequate, and in 2011 alone, whatever happens in July that year, the war-related costs will be double, if not triple, what’s projected.

Perhaps the most difficult challenge for McChrystal in this same period is the planned buildup of Afghan forces, who must be prepared to begin taking over territory from McChrystal’s troops in 18 months. In this case, both he and Obama are paying a huge price for the lack of investment under the Bush administration, and the U.S. must run at almost double-time pace to catch up with where it wants to be.

Gates has testified that the goal is to have an Afghan army of 170,000 by July 2011, but Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told senators that only about 98,000 Afghan troops are trained to date, and many of them are not yet in the field.

In a year’s time, the goal is to have this number at 134,000, but the lack of Afghan partners poses a more immediate challenge in deciding where the U.S. can now best target its own military operations against Taliban strongholds in the Kandahar and Helmand regions.

How long can the U.S.
hold an area — without Afghan partners — and not appear to be an occupying force to villagers most affected? It’s a decision for McChrystal in the field but also one that has to be watched closely for Obama, now that this is his war, as well.

“He’s got to be very, very much on top of the type of missions and the way in which these troops are deployed,” Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry (D-Mass.) told POLITICO. “It’s clear to me that there are limitations. We should not be going in, clearing and holding areas where we don’t have the ability to come in immediately with Afghans.”

“If we don’t, we’re going to be digging ourselves a hole,” he said. “[Obama] has to very careful not to allow that to happen.”